

Seattle Light Rail Review Panel

Meeting Notes for January 17, 2001

Agenda Items

- Design Development briefing on the MLK Corridor

Commissioners Present

Rick Sundberg, Chair
Matthew Kitchen
Carolyn Law
Jay Lazerwitz
Jack Mackie
Don Royse

Paul Tomita

Staff Present

Debora Ashland, Sound Transit
John Rahaim, CityDesign/Design Commission
Cheryl Sizov, CityDesign

The meeting began with Panel approval of two sets of meeting notes; November 15th and December 13th, 2000; and approval pending two corrections to the December 6th, 2000 notes. Introductions were followed by an update from Cheryl Sizov on the status of City Design Guidelines for the Southeast Seattle Link Stations. The Panel suggested further discussion of the guidelines at the next meeting on January 31st. Staff noted that other agenda items for the 31st would include remarks by Tuck Wilson, new Link director, and a 60% briefing on the Edmunds station and plaza design.

Design Development Briefing on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Way Corridor

Elizabeth Conner, Sound Transit
Owen Lang, Sasaki and Associates
Norie Sato, STart

Owen Lang started briefing with an overall map of the MLK Corridor showing all four landscape characters: industrial, commercial, residential, and transitional. He referred Panel members to the MLK Corridor design report and other materials, stating that he would be discussing the street conditions, intersection paving, landscaping, station plazas, artists' concepts, retaining walls, and street furniture in the presentation. Highlights from the presentation include the following points:

- We're proposing color and texture to differentiate the trackway and roadway, and to show pedestrian and vehicle zones. The trackway will be like a long runner or rug down the street, with a cobbled texture. At emergency vehicle crossings, the curb will be just 4" and a greater cobble density.
- There are different sidewalk width conditions along the Corridor, including at Rainier Vista a wider sidewalk with on-street parking and street trees. The industrial area has narrower sidewalks and groups or pockets of trees.
- We propose to always "complete" an intersection with one concept before changing to another; e.g. industrial to commercial, or residential to commercial.
- We're still discussing street lighting, and considering three approaches: 1) all City parts/components; 2) more contemporary lighting head on standard City poles; and 3) a new design that complements the OCS but isn't part of a City palette right now. Further discussion will take place with City Light. We do have all lighting locations identified.
- Edmunds station is a gateway to Columbia City so the design reflects that with symmetry in two plazas on either side of Edmunds Street and a bosk of trees. We would use the MLK light

fixture in the plazas but transition to a fixture along Edmunds Street that recalls the Columbia City lights.

- We're also using vocabulary of low walls throughout the Corridor, including here on the plaza.
- For public art, we're setting a stage for each piece in order to give it good visibility and presence. At Edmunds station, the concept is "green lanterns" or a large "human bean" sculpture.
- At Othello station, we've collected several driveways into one on the property that forms a bow-tie configuration to give better buffering to the residential area just to the east. We'll use conifer trees here if there is room. The station plaza at Myrtle includes a couple of systems buildings which we're trying to arrange to yield more frontage for retail space. There are groups of trees in various planters and directly in the ground. Low walls provide seating, a backdrop to the para-transit area, and screening for the systems buildings. Artwork follows the Asian architecture/water/rocks theme with two proposals: 1) fiberoptic walls that change colors through the course of a day, and 2) a philosopher's rock or contemplative rock.
- Henderson station includes low walls again, with a large "heritage" tree on the plaza, a comfort station and bike parking toward the rear of the plaza, and a large tall grove of trees at the very back screening the plaza from the City Light right-of-way area. There are two art proposals for Henderson that utilize the windy conditions there: 1) a sunken area to sit in and be sheltered by, with a photovoltaic-powered fountain and some bamboo for height, and 2) a tower of rotating disks somewhat like those "twirling tires" advertisements. The twirling disks might even generate some power for the rest of the site.
- There is an artwork for Graham that was proposed before the station was deleted—a sculpture that is a kind of "Thrift Store haiku." We wanted to build on the themes of ethnicity, movement, foot traffic, and immigration. The banana is a symbol for the Asian American, the shoe represents foot traffic, etc.
- Retaining walls exist along the Corridor in three conditions; if we solve the worse one first, that design can be applied to the rest and be cost-effective. We're thinking of formboard finish on them. The intent is to create a mending wall not a dividing wall, and we want it to be interesting from different speeds, sightlines, and directions. Other ideas including using sustainable/drought tolerant plants for color and texture, employing lighting to highlight the wall, and exposing the structural system of the wall.
- With respect to the streetscape overall, the design appears to meet the intent of the City's draft Design Guidelines for the MLK Corridor.

At this point, the presentation concluded and Seatran staff commented on the excellent job done by Sasaki and Associates on the MLK Task Force. Seatran then outlined a number of design details that are still being discussed with Sound Transit, including:

- Where pedestrians cross
- Keeping water off the right-of-way
- Using landscaping to direct traffic
- Maintenance of the low walls
- Use of glass in plazas—Seatran discourages glass
- Othello grade transition off the alley
- Henderson bike trail—creating a "T" instead of "Y" intersection
- Visibility of bike storage
- Hard surfaces instead of landscaping in bike parking expansion sites

Diane Davis from Rainier Valley Transit Advisory Committee expressed her satisfaction with the work as well.

Panel Discussion

- I like the idea of opening the corner up at Myrtle to allow future retail and maintaining a separation between commercial and residential by placing systems buildings as a screen/buffer. A "glass" corner would activate the plaza and keep eyes on the station—pursue this further.
- I agree that having retail there makes sense. Try to encourage it in other locations as well.
- The excess of paving is still a concern to me, both aesthetically and safety-wise. Some pedestrians may feel the trackway is a "safe zone." Why can't it be green between the tracks like in San Jose. This is an extreme safety issue. Does river rock help or hinder pedestrian safety. What about the areas in-between stations? (We're trying to use street trees in the parking strip to direction foot traffic. Water is a concern as far as putting vegetation between the tracks—this is very high voltage. Cobble is used in San Francisco and works.)
- I'm not sure I agree that this is a huge safety issue, nor that the suggestion for landscaping would make a difference.
- Is the trackway the same distance apart throughout? (Yes.) Why can't it be vegetated? (Maintenance is an issue in terms of safety of workers.)
- Will there be a sign at the intersection saying "Train approaching"? (Yes.)
- What is the height of the retaining wall? Are you restricted to short, small trees? (The wall is up to 20' high, and there are houses above it. We aren't necessarily restricted to short trees.)
- Can you soften the wall with vines or other vegetation? (Yes, there are opportunities for rhythm and color with plants.)
- Although I'm not usually a big fan of high walls, in this case I'm mostly convinced that this is the best alternative.
- Is the space between the walls accessible? (We'd prefer that it not be, for safety reasons. Maintainable but not accessible.)
- So this is the mother wall to all the other little walls?! (Yes.)
- The pockets of planting don't particularly work well. (The ziggurat form works well, but we're still working out the engineering so the exact design may change.)
- Landscaping is still such an important aspect of the Corridor design—when will we see the details? We keep hearing hints that the attitude toward landscaping is more inventive than the typical approach, but need to see specifics. (60% design is to establish the conditions; now we're designing details and will bring them back to you. We want to use larger plant materials here if we can get them.)
- Where are the pedestrian railings? (At the approach ramps, refuge areas, and between the tracks. We're exploring how to bring some unity to them, even though each station is designing their own right now.)
- What is your approach to the railings? (In San Francisco, they were background, but here might be more of a statement.)
- The railing could be uniform and system-wide unless used as a work of art. In St. Louis the light rail had railings that were fairly utilitarian and constant throughout the system. It can be too costly and too confusing visually to design them all uniquely.
- The railings need to be handsome, but I think that otherwise the artwork is what truly identified the uniqueness of each station. Cluttering that with other elements is self-defeating. Preserve the visual space for art versus having many elements compete for attention.
- Yes, there are so many elements out there. Decide to let some of them recede to the background.

- Are the budgets consistent among the stations? (The station plazas are consistent at \$175,000; one sculpture is at \$100,000.) Is this a competitive situation vis a vis artists' selection? (We're caught by this schedule where we're not sure what will happen with station design and may need to reconsider design in the future if construction is delayed. So does one proceed with designing artwork now, or wait until closer to construction? We do have two proposals now.)
- Have you considering "clearing the table" of artwork/selected artists and waiting until later? (Sound Transit is wrestling with the schedule, trying to decide whether to take the designs to 60% and then hold, or proceed to 100% now. If the design sits on the shelf, we still will have identified the key opportunities and themes.)
- I guess there is the chance the art would influence station design now in a positive way, whereas artwork done later would obviously not.
- I think the artwork has already been successful in starting that conversation and stimulus.
- I have a technical concern regarding the glass wall—it will get etched! Photo-voltaic elements tend to "disappear" too—stolen or destroyed. (Yes, that is a concern. Technology will change between now and 2008 too.)
- What is the proposed use of the Henderson plaza? This will affect my thought on the art. (Meant to be a gateway to Rainier Beach, as well as to the city from the south. We want to somehow turn the powerline into an asset and work with it. The plaza program was to site the systems buildings, provide a comfort station and bike parking.) I'm curious about creating a refuge away from the station in the powerline area—is that possible? (We're trying to borrow the view without getting into the easement.)

Chris Larsen interjected that City Light is not opposed to making the powerline area a visual asset but is concerned about drawing people into it—there is a lot of power there!

- Will the Metro shelters be their typical design, or is there an opportunity to create special ones for the Corridor? (We've raised the issue. The shelters adjacent to plazas potentially have the opportunity to be customized.)

Cheryl noted that the MLK Corridor work has come a long way in the last two years, and thanked Owen for his good work. Rick Sundberg agreed, saying the Panel still has some reservations about certain elements, but that overall progress has been good. The Panel then proceeded to the following action:

Action

The Panel appreciates the depth of work done on the MLK Corridor, including Seatran's participation on the Task Force and as reviewers of the design. The Panel recommends approval of the 60% design as presented, and suggests further work on the following items as design progresses:

- ***Coordination of posts, light poles, and OCS as a "family" of elements, pursuing use of stylish lighting along the lines of Option C presented to the Panel;***
- ***Emphasize clear areas of use for pedestrians, through the use of different materials and with clear refuges;***
- ***Landscaping design seen sooner rather than later by the Panel—including more description of the concepts of "backbone, fill, and heritage" trees;***
- ***Discussion of Sound Transit will maintain the freshness of design—particularly artwork—with a delayed construction schedule;***

- *Accommodating potential future retail opportunities at the Othello plaza, and consideration for separating residential and commercial/plaza at the alley;*
- *Support for a "reverse" ziggurat (changing the direction of the wall angles), creating a view from both north and south directions, and expression of the wall construction in its design, pending an additional review by the Panel prior to 90% design; and*
- *Development of railings as system-wide elements, done simply and handsomely but allowing other elements such as artwork to give local character and identity to each station.*

With that, the meeting adjourned at 6:10 pm.